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"THE INFLUENCE OF WASHINGTON."

ADDRESS

BEFORE THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BERKS

BY

RICHMOND L. JONES, ESQ.

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“THE INFLUENCE OF WASHINGTON.”

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BERKS COUNTY, PA.,
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By RICHMOND L. JONES, Esq.

The close of a century, like the close of a life, musters to the memory the things comprehended within its range. From away down the dim vista of the past, we see events returning with the quickness of thought and marching by, in such swift review, that a moment of contemplation may encompass the deeds of a hundred years.

The illustrious dead are raised, and, as on a mimic stage, their parts are played over again for the edification of our thought. How wonderful and mysterious is thought, intangible, invisible, incomprehensible,—yet so potent and substantial that it writes its story upon the countenance of every mind wherein it lodges. Joyous or distressing, noble or ignoble, honest or deceitful, how quickly the face proclaims the thought. And not for the moment, but it draws its lines and plows its furrows until the character of the man is as plainly told upon his countenance as if it were illumined by letters of gold, or scarred by the branding iron.

Thought is the only thing we know in

nature that is imperishable, that never dies, that can be given away and yet retained, that is diffusive without limit and yet without impairing its substance. It pleases the fancy of the child, nerves the strong man's arm and rules the world. It is love, pity, charity, the mother of all the graces. Its range is endless in past and future and its power is limited, in this world, only by the feeble instrumentalities, in the form of men, through whom its decrees are executed. Is thought a product of the human brain? Who ever forged or threshed out of his brain a thought? What patient study, ample learning or mathematical science ever created an idea? None at all. Thought is not evolved, it is imbibed. Ideas come to men in dreaming or waking, and the best of them often come to untutored minds. They are what we call wisdom as opposed to learning, for the learned are not always wise and often deform and disfigure good thoughts in molding them into practical rules and regulations.

Thought is of the divine essence and is infused into the minds of men in greater or less degree as the Providence that rules the world appoints them to do His bidding.

* * *

There is perchance no such thing as individual thought, but only expression. If the phenomenon does not originate in the mind, if the brain is only an instrument played upon by thought, then the mystery is less involved and its manifestations are more readily comprehended. It has been said men think in platoons, but that is diminutive, for we know a thought or an idea possesses whole nations and races of men, controls their actions and regulates their conduct. We know that whole nations have been moved by some great impulse to migrate, and that the seeming or apparent cause affords no justification for the movement.

* * *

We know that the greatest upheavals and revolutions of mankind, which in the retrospect we clearly see were processes of evolution, designed to accomplish great results, were begun for trifling reasons, altogether disproportionate to the violence or magnitude of the remedy, and leading generally to consequences altogether unexpected and misunderstood.

* * *

Such, indeed, was the case of our own revolution. A new world was discovered, a hundred seeming causes, such as religious persecution, thirst for gold, love of adventure, escape from military service and the like, peopled the new continent with a heterogeneous lot of colonies, with no interests in common, but jealous of and hostile to each other, and with all their sympathies and reminiscences beyond their immediate border, flowing along the lines which tied them to their old homes beyond the sea. Their rugged lives, many hardships, sufferings and privations, from the rigor of the climate and constant warfare with the native savages, their moral sentiments and discipline like

unto that of the Israelites under Moses in the desert, refined them as in a crucible and raised up a generation of Spartans ready for God's great purposes.

* * *

And what then? In the fulness of time, great England, the land of the free, which for a thousand years had fought the fight and won the battle against prerogative and the abuse of power, was prompted to a series of petty annoyances, indignities and trifling oppressions, which whipped and spurred the colonies into a common line of resistance; but when this culminated in a clash of arms, there was still no thought of separation from the mother country or of the establishment of a new nation—so little did men comprehend the thought that impelled them or the great part that they were to play in the world's history.

* * *

We see it now, not as the plan of men but as part of the design of a great Providence, as the operation of a great thought that was sifting through the sluggish minds of men, by which they were impelled but not enlightened to a degree of comprehension.

* * *

Even after more than a year of war, when the men of '76 came to the consideration and finally to the Declaration of Independence, they did not understand the importance of the great parts they played, and were content with the recitation of a few little grievances as a justification for renouncing their allegiance to the King and proclaiming that a baker's dozen of little colonies were free and independent states;—a consummation not devoutly to be wished of itself (as fully appeared after the war) without that more perfect union established by the Constitution more than ten years thereafter, whereby the little states were combined and consolidated into a Nation. This consummation was our obvious destiny, but it was revealed to the actors by steps. The thought played upon the minds of men, but only

the finer clay responded clearly to its touch. The patriots of that day were thrilled by its inspiration and offered their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor as sacrifices for the cause, but they knew little of the cause. They saw the beginning but had no conception of the end. Could they have seen the unfolding of the design, the reward of their sufferings and sacrifices would have been sublime. If their imaginations could have pictured the transformation scene of a hundred years, a nation of 80,000,000 people, embracing the continent from ocean to ocean, from the lakes to the gulf, and expanding to the frozen North upon the one hand and to the sun-kissed tropics on the other; not only free in itself, but happy in the consciousness of having freed the world—how it would have stirred their souls and compensated their sacrifices.

* * *

There was one man from whose vision the curtain seemed in some measure withdrawn—he saw as through a glass, darkly, but his conduct could not have been so fitting and appropriate to an end unseen, without an inspiration. He was a chosen instrument to release the world from its bondage, to set mankind upon a higher plane, to accomplish a revolution not simply of the government of the American colonies, but of the ideas which obtained in the government of all the civilized nations of the earth—and that man was the great George Washington. He was the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, which inspired the patriot legions in battle, revived and encouraged their drooping spirits in privation and suffering. He was the soul and body of the cause. When he drew his sword at Cambridge he thrilled the patriots with hope, when, after a succession of reverses that broke the hearts of the sturdiest and filled their minds with despair almost to the point of yielding, he rekindled the fires of enthusiasm by his daring and valorous achievement at Trenton. He shared the privations of his soldiers at Valley Forge, upheld the trembling hands of the Continental

Congress, restored, by his example, the faltering courage of the statesmen and soldiers about him, and finally encompassed the defeat and surrender of the British army at Yorktown and brought his haughty and powerful adversary to the acknowledgment of the independence of the States. So much for his military career. A great victory by his valor over a great power in arms, but as great a victory, by his steadfast courage and the influence of his noble example, over his open and covert enemies and his fainthearted and faltering associates at home. With all this, however, it is said, that without the chance of the French alliance, engendered not by love of the colonies or their cause, but by the envy, hatred and malice borne toward England by the French, the cause would have been lost and the history of the world would have been written on different lines; but the sequel proves that there was no chance, and philosophy vindicated its teaching, that in all the universe every movement is design.

"All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction which thou
canst not see,
All discord, harmony not understood,
All partial evil, universal good."

* * *

Recurring to the theme of pervading thought, in the light of the events of the past century—it is clear that the thought and impulse of the American revolution and the succeeding French revolution, were kindred, and were not local but universal, were parts of a general scheme and purpose affecting all mankind, and that the great events of the century have been only successive developments of the same great thought, not born of men but of the Providence that rules mankind.

* * *

The military career of Washington, however, was but the beginning of his great work. The colonies had become free and independent states, but the extreme pressure that had united them for a common defense, being withdrawn, the process of disintegration

speedily began. The general government, such as it was, was without power to maintain itself or to command respect either abroad or at home. It was dependent upon the states for its revenues and was a mere agency which soon fell into contempt.

* * *

The colonies were not homogeneous, their old habits returned and with them their old animosities. They were jealous of Congress and distrustful of each other; the confederation was a league without power to enforce its decrees, to regulate commerce or to protect the states against internal disorder or the encroachments of their neighbors. All was discord and tending to anarchy, and Europe awaited complacently the dissolution and disintegration of the power that had defied and triumphed over the arms of England, and the failure of the undertaking to establish a republic even upon soil where monarch had never trod. The victory that had been so dearly bought was turning to ashes, and the fire of American patriotism was fading and chilling in the hearts of the men who had accomplished so much under its inspiration.

The situation was desperate. All that had been won seemed lost, and except for Washington, the protracted struggle of the revolution would have been in vain. As he was the inspiration of the revolution, so he was the soul of the nation. The states mistrusted each other, but all the people trusted him, and his earnest counsel for the establishment of a more perfect union was accepted, and the convention for the framing of the constitution was assembled, with Washington as its presiding officer. The work was done and the instrument submitted to the states for their ratification, but the ratification was finally only obtained upon the assurance and understanding that the first president was to be George Washington. So great and imposing was his individuality: "'First in War, First in Peace, First in the hearts of his countrymen."

When he entered upon his duties as President, he realized, as he said, "that he walked upon untrodden paths," without precedent, but not without finger-board to guide him, for he marched on with that confidence which comes only to him who realizes that he is the instrument of a great purpose, and who mistakes not self-reliance for reliance upon the spirit that inspires him.

* * *

His administration was the cornerstone or sheet-anchor of all that followed, and his great farewell address, when he voluntarily laid down his power and put off the robes of office, has been a guiding star not only to his own countrymen but to all the world.

The history of his life closed with the history of the eighteenth century, of which he was the greatest figure, and a hundred years ago his mortal remains were laid to rest at Mt. Vernon, where all mankind does them homage and reverence.

* * *

But while his life belonged to the eighteenth century, the fruits of it were reaped in the nineteenth, the twentieth will have a greater harvest still, and in all future time his spirit will live and lead all nations to their best development.

* * *

We do not realize what a wonderful influence his life, or the ideas of which his life was an expression, have had upon past and are having upon current events. In the early history of our nation, deeming its principles local and circumscribed by the boundaries of the colonies, our statesmen were wont to boast of this little creation of their wisdom, as "the asylum for the oppressed of all nations"; but a century has demonstrated their lack of comprehension of the scheme—for instead of inviting men here to escape oppression under the shelter of a little state, the spirit behind the little state has banished oppression from the face of the earth, and made all men free. Public opinion everywhere is supreme, monarchs now

mould their decrees and shape their conduct to suit it. Personal liberty and the protection of property is the rule in all the civilized nations. Throughout the continents of Europe and America, the dominions of England in India and Africa, and of Russia and Japan in Asia, personal rights are acknowledged and the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is assured at home, so that no man need seek an asylum.

* * *

And how came it all to pass? Have we vanquished the world in arms? Have these broad and startling results come of the persuasive eloquence of our statesmen, who have been playing upon one string and teaching that our great national aim was selfish, that we were not kindred with other nations and owed the world no duty? No, we must put away the conceit and vanity of attributing it to ourselves or to our example. The thought was universal, first finding expression in our patriots, and successively in other nations, and enforcing itself under various pretexts, through violence, bloodshed, battle and murder, until tranquillity has succeeded the storm in some degree and conviction has settled upon the minds of men. The means to the end were these rough arguments, through which alone the sluggish minds of men seem to be persuaded. As a lancet is needed to get a joke into the craniums of some men, so artillery is required to impress them with a great thought.

* * *

But is the work ended? No, indeed, though it is far on the way, and we must accept the responsibility of moving along the line of our destiny and of performing the task assigned to our generation. That we do not fully comprehend it, is a confession of the limitations of our vision and perceptions, a condition that rules our lives. As we do not comprehend the purpose of our existence here, and know not whence we came nor whither we are going—it should not rudely shock our vanity to say we don't know what we are doing

or what we are doing it for. * * * There was a great clatter a while ago about a sister republic in Cuba, which only needed the moral support of recognition by the United States, to enable its patriot army to drive the Spanish oppressors into the sea. The flag of this phantom republic was everywhere entwined with our own, and was almost as familiar a sight in public and private decorations. We had a Cuban Junta in Washington and New York, and the gamblers who were taking the bonds of this mythical republic by the cart load, kept up such a beating of tom-toms in Congress, as to become an intolerable nuisance, and finally, at their instance, we picked a quarrel with Spain and a great fleet and army were sent away to reinforce our allies. Then began the hunt for the Cuban army. We sought it along the coast in vain; we hired Spanish interpreters to inquire as to its whereabouts, and could get no tidings; and finally a few daring officers volunteered to go into the interior and make diligent search for the legions whose imaginary warfare had been so luridly portrayed by the reporters in the service of the Junta.

* * *

You will remember with what amazement as well as amusement and disgust the country received the report of these officers, that there was no Cuban army, and that the conquest of the island would devolve entirely upon the Americans. You know the rest, viz.: that the conquest was made, and that a military government was established and is maintained, because the gallant Cubans are not fit to govern themselves. I say the government we established is maintained, and it always will be maintained, for the Americans will not depart nor abandon the duty imposed upon them. It is suggested that when war was declared, the Congress proclaimed by resolution that we had no intent to possess the island for ourselves, which was true, and we all know how that declaration came to pass. There was a frantic effort to have the republic recognized, because

that would have given value to the bonds, and failing in that, the friends of the Junta procured the declaration of purpose. It was not a stipulation nor a treaty, for it was addressed to no one and influenced no one's conduct.

* * *

There was no Cuban Republic and upon that discovery the Cuban flags disappeared. They were silently withdrawn by the American people and Old Glory stands alone, which is significant of the common purpose and sentiment.

* * *

We are in Cuba as well as in the Philippines and Porto Rica, and to assume that we are there because of the grotesque masquerading of the Cuban Republic or because of any other set of curious chances, would be to confess a lack of comprehension.

We walked blindly into a new sphere, without expecting to espouse these new responsibilities, but looking backward we see clearly that our steps were guided and directed, and our duty is plain.

* * *

Our young nation had scarcely caught its breath before it began to assume the responsibility of territory acquired. The history of the nation has been the history of its expansion, and now that it has become one of the great powers of the world, the duty is upon it to work out its destiny along the lines so plainly indicated.

* * *

Those lines of activity are manifested among the living nations all over the world. One great thought inspires them all for they are proceeding with one accord. We were first in developing the interior of our continent by spanning it with railroads from sea to sea. Russia follows in awakening the echoes of interior Asia by a railroad from the Baltic to the Pacific, and England opens the dark continent of Africa, the only terra incognita of our day, by

a line from Cairo to the Cape. These great developments which are to enrich the world of the twentieth century, are only possible by union and combination. The great powers of the earth must divide its surface among them.

Commerce will not tolerate the hindrance of petty nations as obstructions in its path. Their uses have gone, as have the tribal and other divisions of man suited to a pastoral age. All things are upon a grander scale. Nations deal with continents now as they used to do with valleys and peninsulas, and great developments for the benefit of mankind can only be executed by a single hand.

* * *

The little nations everywhere are simply disturbers of the peace and must be absorbed for their own welfare as well as for the common weal. When this shall have been accomplished, then the system of arbitration, inaugurated at The Hague will find its consummation. The world will be at peace, the condition of mankind ameliorated and improved, and the great thought which has impelled men to a common purpose and driven them step by step without their knowledge or against their will, will have been comprehended by a more general intelligence and larger experience, added to the advantage of looking backward.

* * *

That it was revealed to the immortal Washington, his life and character attest, and all the nations of the world acknowledge.

* * *

Lord Brougham's tribute expresses the sense of mankind. He said "It will be the duty of the historian and the sage of all nations to let no occasion pass of commemorating this illustrious man, and until time shall be no more, will a test of the progress which our race has made in wisdom and virtue be derived from the veneration paid to the immortal name of Washington."





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